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SUBJECT: PROTESTS AGAINST MONGOLIAN GOVERNMENT GROW

Ref: A) ULAANBAATAR 247

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DISTRIBUTION.

1. (U) SUMMARY: Protests organized by a loose coalition of five local Mongolian groups have escalated slightly in the past few days but remain peaceful; business is conducted as usual in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. The protest groups are continuing to demand respectively the resignation of all three branches of government, the pullout of Ivanhoe Mines from Mongolia, and compensation of four billion Tugrik (approximately USD \$ 3.3 million) from the state budget for damages during the recent fires at SAPU company buildings (REFTEL). While the daily number of demonstrators fluctuates from under 100 to nearly 3,000 yesterday, the overall numbers have increased and now six gers (yurts) and a tent have been erected on Sukhbaatar Square in front of the Government House to house permanent members of the sit in. After street skirmishes with police on Sunday April 9, following an attempt to build additional gers, the protestors successfully called for a larger demonstration on Tuesday April 11, attracting a crowd of 2,000-3,000. Some streets remain blocked as police search likely trucks for ger materials. The Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), which controls the current government, has organized counter protests of comparable size reportedly by requiring city district leaders to mobilize residents. The protests have not disrupted government business except for periodically blocking access to the Government House and the Prime Minister's briefing to the diplomatic corps did not touch upon the topic at all. END SUMMARY.

SUNDAY: POLICE SKIRMISHES, INCREASED CROWDS
AND MORE GERS

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2. (U) The recent spate of protests began to gather strength on Sunday, April 9, after several days of small crowds gathering on the square. Attempts to construct additional gers (yurts in Russian) were only partially successful as police blocked all roads leading to the square and searched vehicles. A scuffle

developed on streets west of the square between 300-350 police and an approximately equal number of protestors as police attempted to block entry of 3-4 trucks carrying ger parts. After minor pushing and shoving for 3-4 hours, the police confiscated the gers. The Radical Reform movement filed an appeal with the Ulaanbaatar Administrative Court to challenge the confiscation of private citizen property (i.e. the gers) and the widespread searching of trucks for ger parts.

13. (U) Movement leaders made televised appeals for more participants, additional ger parts and financial contributions to increase the protests. They called for a mass demonstration at 11:00am Tuesday April 11. Ganbaatar, head of the Radical Reform Movement, pushed for the exodus of Ivanhoe Mines stating "If Mongolia were able to own fifty percent of the shares of the deposits of Oyu Tolgoi (Ivanhoe's mine project site) every citizen would receive USD \$2,000 per month and live without hunger and thirst." (COMMENT: While this comment is without any apparent solid foundation in fact, it resonates with the increased popular sentiment that mining proceeds are being withheld from the citizenry. END COMMENT.)

TUESDAY: THOUSANDS TURN OUT AND
COUNTER DEMONSTRATIONS

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14. (U) After a relatively quiet Monday when protestors didn't number above 100-150 at any given time, a mass

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demonstration gathered strength on Tuesday around lunchtime with a majority of students and elderly in the crowd estimated between 2,000-3,000 on the square. Victims of the SAPU fire blocked the north entrances to the Government House, keeping Members of Parliament trapped inside for the afternoon (including two MP invitees to the Charge's anti-money-laundering luncheon). By 4:00pm a crowd of 300-400 began marching down Peace Avenue for about a half mile and blocked traffic for several hours, while counter demonstrators marched in the opposite direction to Sukhbaatar Square. The two groups met and minor scuffles ensued which were dissolved with police assistance after an hour, following which both groups dispersed peacefully.

15. (U) The members of the Radical Reform Movement were the most organized and coordinated, wearing violet colored ribbons and ties to symbolize unity, explaining that when all colors of the rainbow are mixed violet results. Their leader, Ganbaatar, noted that the group will turn the sit-in into a hunger strike if their demands for government resignation and the exodus of Ivanhoe Mines are not met. He stated, "We want to fill Sukhbaatar Square with gers to remind government leaders of the poverty in which the majority of their citizens live."

16. (U) SAPU fire victims gathered first on the north side of the square to block the main entrance of the Government House. They claim that the 740 stallholder victims of the fire in the market actually represent 12,500 victims if their families are included. The protest used loudspeakers and whistles and threatened to also begin a hunger strike if their demand for compensation of four billion Tugriks is not met.

17. (SBU) The MPRP is rumored to have mobilized its city district party members to organize residents, and requiring each to gather at least fifty people, to assemble across town in Liberty Square in a pro-government counter demonstration. The group consisted

primarily of elderly and students with sign slogans such as "We deserve stable government," and "Stop disturbing the public with your narrow personal ambitions." Students were bussed in from their universities and reportedly promised 5,000 Tugrik (a little over USD \$4) to attend the rally in the name of the Free Student's Movement, organized a few days previously. Counter demonstrators with similar signs also gathered across the street from Sukhbaatar Square wearing blue ribbons and ties and the two groups joined when the Liberty Square rally marched to Sukhbaatar Square.

DEMANDS FROM DEMONSTRATORS TO POLICE

18. (U) On Tuesday afternoon, the heads of the movements were received by police chief Major General D. Sandig-Ochir for a meeting. Journalists were not allowed due to the "lack of space in the meeting room." Reportedly the movement leaders made three demands: 1) release from police detention eight persons arrested on April 6 during the demonstrations, 2) allow additional gers to be built on Sukhbaatar Square and stop searching trucks, 3) instead of using police to stop a political struggle, require them to protect the demonstrators who have the right to be in Sukhbaatar Square. O. Magnai, head of the Healthy Society Movement, said that Sandig-Ochir agreed to allow more gers to be built on the square but that the cases of the eight detained protestors had been sent to the courts already and thus were out of his hands.

MEDIA REACTION: IT ALL DEPENDS ON HOW YOU LOOK AT IT

19. (U) Mongolia's freewheeling print media has been

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providing wide coverage of the protests. Pro-opposition papers have been carrying relatively favorable reports (the protests are popular movements for change) as front page news while pro-government outlets are more critical (the protestors are rabble rousers threatening social stability) and have been relegating protest stories to the inside pages and playing down the numbers. In a recent example, pro-opposition daily "Odriin Sonin" ("Daily News") ran a front page story on April 10 with this headline: "The number of Gers is Increasing and so is the Number of Protestors." Reporting on the same basic story, pro-government party organ "Unen" ("Truth"), ran the story on page three with this headline: "The Number of Gers Increased, but There are Fewer Protestors." Since gers are large and immobile, the numbers are hard to dispute. The number of protestors is much more fluid and open to creative interpretation. Pro-opposition outlets run the highest mid-day estimates while the pro-government media appears to use lower morning or evening numbers.

110. (U) The few ostensibly unbiased media outlets questioned the feasibility of the protest goals. Independent daily "Ardyn Erkh" ("People's Right") led a skeptical article with a headline asking "Is it Possible to kill Three Rabbits with One Bullet?," referring to the protestors' demands for the resignation of the President, Government and Parliament.

111. (SBU) COMMENT: While the numbers of protestors has increased slightly and there were minor skirmishes with police, the mood in the capital remains calm and business continues as usual in both the government and

private sectors. Members of Parliament have noted that while the general public appears to condone the protests as an expression of free will and discontent which is healthy for a democratic society, there are not large numbers of average citizens joining the primarily students and elderly on the square. Protesters have sometimes blocked main traffic routes near the square, provoking the ire of some residents. One resident Ambassador was concerned that tired and beleaguered police, many of whom had been on alert for several consecutive days, might overreact to continued provocations. There is also the question of how long the current government will tolerate continued transport disruptions before it feels the need to underscore its control of the streets. Post will continue to monitor and report events as they unfold.
END COMMENT.

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